

The Will of the Force: Glimmers of Darkness

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Summary: An alternate universe where Anakin never became a Padawan.

1. Default Chapter Title

What follows is a work of fan-fiction based on characters and situations owned by Lucasfilm Ltd. I am not being compensated, nor breaking copyright. This is an Alternate History Story. What if Anakin had never been trained as a Padawan? The story develops the relationships between the characters from TPM (spoilers are in the story, by the way). The story ends 10 years after TPM.

THE WILL OF THE FORCE: GLIMMERS OF DARKNESS by Teresa Martin

Obi-Wan was not going to tell the young boy the truth. The young Jedi stood in the shadows, watching the unsuspecting boy playing nearby. Obi-Wan was only vaguely aware of Coruscant's lights playing off of his pale features. "They all sense it, why can't you?" The scene with Qui-Gon played continually before his eyes. Obi-Wan felt a great disturbance in the Force. He knew that he was on the threshold of something important that could involve the fate of the galaxy. And it was on his shoulders. It's only a boy, he thought "They all sense it, why can't you?" he had told Qui-Gon. . Master Yoda saw it. Why then did the Council give in? Out of pity? Emotions? Obi-Wan shuddered a little. Was the Council weak? He banished the thought, for the possibility was too disconcerting. "They all sense it, why can't you?" I feel it. I see it. Obi-Wan was trying desperately not to think disloyal thoughts about his late master. He shuddered again. No, face the truth. Qui-Gon was wrong, and he should not have made me promise at that terrible moment. Qui-Gon was like a father. I would have promised to sell my soul to the Sith had he asked at that time. Instead, he asked me to train a little boy, this boy whom he had so recently befriended. Anakin would be so disappointed! Yoda said he would be my Padawan Learner, but he did not order me to take him. I am not bound to train the boy. "My focus creates my reality," Obi-Wan whispered his master's instructions. My focus, how can I focus, what

point of view may I create? Could he lie to Anakin? No, but there were other ways, and he thought about how he could mislead the boy without lying.

"The Council has not told me that I can train you, Anakin." The blue eyes looked up quickly. "But Qui-Gon said . . ." "I know, but there is more to the Force than following one's instinct, there is more than one Jedi who can sense the Force. We must abide by the Council's decision." "So you can't be my master?" Anakin's face was twitching. He wanted to cry, but he wouldn't. He was not on Tatooine where his mother could wipe away the tears. He would not cry in front of Obi-Wan. "I won't be your master, Anakin," Obi-wan was careful in his wording, "but I will always be your friend."

The Council sat in silence, none speaking, but all sharing the same thoughts. Obi-Wan had gone back on his promise, and they were satisfied.

"The Force has decided," Mace Windu declared.

All nodded.

"And impressed I am with Obi-Wan. His discernment is unusually strong," Yoda commented. Stronger than this Council's, Yoda believed, but was too prudent to say.

They all knew that there was something wrong with Anakin. Yoda was particularly vocal, yet they went ahead and gave permission for his training. Then it seemed that the Force intervened and used Obi-Wan, a new, young Jedi, to put the Council back on course, to prevent them from making a terrible mistake.

"But the boy," Mace Windu said, "Qui-Gon took him away from his mother, for nothing."

"Qui-Gon was wrong to promise something that was for the Council to decide," Depa Billaba commented.

"Nevertheless, Qui-Gon was a Jedi," Mace Windu replied, "we are responsible for the boy."

"Responsible we will be," Yoda replied.

Queen Amidala of Naboo showed no emotion as she sat intent on hearing the next question from the holographic image:

"May a good leader break a Republic's trust?"

"No."

"Even though good result?"

"No," she repeated, "As I understand it, Supreme Chancellor, there are two things from which a Republic wishes to defend itself: the tyranny of a minority, to be sure, but no less the tyranny of a majority. Neither one may be acceptable, no matter what results.

Objective law is in this case our defense. We may stretch, but never break."

"Even if it means losing your throne?"

"I would lose it willingly if breaking the law was my only alternative."

"And what then of Naboo?"

"The fate of Naboo does not depend upon me, as though I were some sort of god. I represent the people, I am not the people. Were I to step down, a worthy successor would be found. Failure or success should never be interpreted as a right to violate the Republic's laws."

"Marvelous, Your Highness. I am pleased that we agree on this matter."

"As I am, Chancellor. How happy I am that I may trust you with the burdens we face. You will act in the Republic's interests. I have a good feeling about the future."

"And I enjoy such conversations with you. Now, to more mundane tasks . . . may I discuss the latest bill with you? It seems that once again the Trade Federation is attempting . . ."

It was usually difficult to see the teenager under the tinkling head-dress and low voice, but once Amidala was alone, and wiped the make-up from her face, she changed. Her stretch pants, and bright red sweater, hanging loosely from her tiny frame showed the fifteen year-old girl, who she became only infrequently.

Amidala tucked her feet under her as she sat on her couch, closing her eyes. A handmaiden, unbidden, came with a hot drink which she took gratefully.

The door to her chambers opened and Sabe, her loyal body-guard and decoy entered, "Sorry to disturb you, your Highness, but there is a message for you."

Amidala stifled a groan and asked, "Can it wait?"

"It can, Queen, but I believe that you will not find this message taxing. It is from Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Queen Amidala met her two friends at the hangar. Her entourage consisting of handmaidens and bodyguards accompanied her. Amidala was still in her casual clothes, but she had adopted her regal bearing, and greeted her friends in the lower voice she used as Queen. They went directly from the hangar to her chambers where Anakin fairly pounced on her, shouting out all the exciting things he had done since they last met. Obi-Wan smiled at the boy's enthusiasm and at the displays of youth he saw before him.

"So when do we leave?"

"Right away, Ani,"

"Yippee!"

"And when we free your mother, she will come live with me on Naboo. My people have agreed to then sponsor your education."

"Out of gratitude for your heroics, Ani," Obi-Wan said.

"And out of kind hearts," Amidala added.

They all smiled. The anticipation was so high! Finally a happy ending to Anakin and Shmi's story was at hand.

Obi-Wan had felt such evil only once before.

It was during the fight with Darth Maul. Such hate, desire for revenge, such evil!

The Dark Side.

But now it was coming from this innocent boy.

Anakin sat brooding in a corner of the Queen's transport flying back to Naboo, without his mother. His mother was gone, lost in a gambling game. Sent off-world with a smuggler. He would never see her again.

Amidala had hidden herself in her chambers, in tears.

Obi-Wan recalled Anakin's test before the Council, "Your fear of losing your mother," they had said. And now he had lost her.

How wise they were to discern that inordinate fear was connected to the capacity for evil! Once again he was grateful that this boy was not to be trained. He was dangerous, and the best place for him was on Naboo with an ordinary life. Or as ordinary as a ten-year old hero's could be.

That was his last thought before the transport entered Naboo's atmosphere and disappeared into a cloak of clouds.

TEN YEARS LATER

The Queen never allowed her chill gaze to leave the suitor as he told a story of his latest actions in the Galactic Senate.

"It appears, Senator, that your actions were very cowardly," she commented.

The young man's smile froze, but he quickly regained his composure and replied, "Your Highness is as usual correct. I thank you for your brilliant insight. If only all sovereigns would . . ."

And he went on and on as the decoy, Sabe, smiled to herself. She did indeed enjoy playing games with these suitors. If she commented that their mothers were nerf-herders they would praise her insight, no

doubt! As the ninth course of the meal was served, Sabe retained her icy stare and enjoyed watching the young man squirm, trying to impress the Queen whom he no doubt wished to marry for political alliances and power. Sometimes for fun Amidala would watch in her room and would laugh with her friends at the spectacle as entertaining as a holo-vid. But not tonight, for Amidala was involved in a different recreation.

"Move left," the voice shouted in her ear, "right, brake, right!"

The podracer flew over the sandy landscape of Tatooine.

"I did move right, Ani!" Amidala shouted to her crew leader through the digital microphone, just as she rounded a corner and saw a wall looming ahead of her.

"Ami, look out!" Anakin shouted just as the podracer slammed into the wall and burst into flames.

Immediately the landscape of Tatooine disappeared as Anakin and Amidala took off their helmets, thereby dissolving their virtual game.

"If you had just done what I told you!" Anakin complained

"I did! But I wasn't fast enough. Not everybody has Jedi reflexes."

The friends collapsed onto a couch drinking the refreshments set out by Amidala's handmaidens. Even though Amidala was a good five years older than the nineteen-year-old Anakin Skywalker, the tall, young man towered over her.

Amidala enjoyed these moments when she could let her hair down literally and figuratively. Anakin had come to Naboo two days before, having accepted Amidala's invitation to celebrate his graduation from the Academy on Naboo. In reality there were two parties planned: the formal one in the palace's ball room with dignitaries, suitors, and even Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. That party ended at midnight, and then the real one began in Anakin's guest quarters.

"And that one can go on to any time," Anakin said with a wicked grin.

Amidala did not comment, but changed the subject, "I will be happy to see Kister again. How happy I am that the two of you were able to go to the Academy together."

"I am so glad you footed the bill for it . . . his freedom and his tuition."

"Someone once told me that the problem with the universe is that nobody helps each other."

"Yeah, yeah." Anakin leaned back and grinned at Amidala, no longer quite with that younger brother look. Amidala ignored it as usual. He was so young . . . and cocky.

There was another one strong in the Force on whom she looked with more interest.

The dignitaries arrived and filled the ballroom at Theed palace. Amidala was outside the hall looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror which her handmaidens opened before her. Her regal hair was tangled in braids, wound around her head, with one thick mass of large curls trailing down her back. Her dress was sky blue, thin straps, and flowed to the ground in several layers. On her head was a shimmering silver headdress draping across her forehead and dangling down both sides of her head.

She looked

"Magnificent," Obi-Wan thought from where he watched her from the shadows. His blue eyes were fixed intently on her. Amidala sensed that someone was watching and turned her gaze on him with a smile.

"Obi-Wan!" She ran to him with her dress floating behind and about her, a jangle of jewelry announcing her movements. She held out her hands, and beamed up at him. He took them gently. Obi-Wan's hood was down revealing short, tidy hair, as befit his character. As usual, he addressed Amidala with the utmost respect and politeness,

"Your Highness, forgive me. I am late. I know that everyone should be present before you arrive."

"Nothing of that, nothing Obi-Wan. I'm just so glad you made it. It will mean the world to Ani!" And she kept beaming. Obi-Wan forced his eyes away, a man should never look too long at her. It was dangerous, especially for a Jedi whose work afforded him no opportunity to woo or marry a woman at the present time.

Amidala leaned close, and whispered, "After the banquet, Ani is planning a real party in his quarters. Will you come? Oh, do!" She pleaded not noticing that Obi-Wan had stepped away from her.

"I am sure you young adults do not need a Jedi ruining your party. Everyone would be in such fear of offending me that they wouldn't let loose and have fun. Isn't that what you all want?"

"Yes, but"

"No `buts.' I will now quickly make an entrance, so that you may make yours." He bowed his head slightly and retreated backwards a step, in homage, before pulling on his hood with both hands and disappearing into the ball room.

Amidala watched him go, her heart making a little flip-flop, as did most women's when they saw Obi-Wan perform even the most common of gestures. She sighed, and put on her invisible mask as Queen. With a nod she summoned her handmaidens to open the doors.

A trumpet blast turned Anakin's head. She was coming, and high time too! Anakin's shoulder length, loose hair was brushed to gleaming and he had on a dark elegant suit, tied about the waist and falling to his thighs, under which he wore black pants. Similar to the way the elegant Senators dressed. Similar to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine who was standing next to him. All looked to the top of the hall and bowed as the Queen entered. Anakin could not help but be mesmerized. Yet she looked so solemn and sad. He could sense her tension, her uncertainty, something he never felt when she was alone with him. He smiled at her and tried to give her confidence. She ignored him, slightly annoying the confident young man, as though she did not need him. His eyes dropped to his boots, and when he raised them again he saw Obi-Wan watching her as well, with a look as sad and solemn as her own. Anakin was pleased to see his friend. He smiled at the Jedi and tried to gather his attention using the Force. Obi-Wan ignored him too. He seemed deep in thought.

More than annoyed now, Anakin muttered, "Everyone's acting like strangers. If nobody ever has any fun at these functions, why have them at all?"

"Ah, but my son," a voice said near to him, "such opportunities these events provide to make acquaintances, have oneself seen!"

Anakin was confused. At first he thought the voice had come from his head, but then he realized it was from Chancellor Palpatine standing near him. "But it's all a show," Anakin replied.

"As are most things we do," Palpatine said with a knowing smile. Anakin fought back an urge to scowl at the older man. Instead he again tried to catch the eye of Obi-Wan, and succeeded. The Jedi smiled happily as he came to meet his young friend.

"No, Ani!" Rabe cried in shock, but with a tinge of excitement that said she was enjoying herself as Anakin and Kister began to climb on top of a glass table. They wished to demonstrate the dance moves they learned growing up on Tatooine.

"Be careful, Ani," Amidala warned, "this tacky music is still popular with the Hutts. They may send bounty hunters after you for mocking them."

"Who's mocking? This is great music!"

"Very well, then. But I'll send a bounty hunter after you if you break that table!"

Anakin's answer was a wicked laugh. The boys were being foolish and were showing off for the handmaidens who looked as though they would anything for these young men, moral or not.

When done with his demonstration, Amidala pulled Anakin aside and whispered mischievously, "Your groupies are indeed enjoying themselves."

"Groupies," he looked around, "just a bunch of nice girls."

"My handmaidens."

"And what of them?" he grinned in a manner which infuriated Amidala for she knew that Anakin was so good-looking and conceited that he took adoring women as a matter of course. "And besides, many are my friends. I grew up with them."

At this he acknowledged Ailee who waved back a little unsteadily. She had had a bit too much to drink.

He looked down at Amidala, still grinning, "I am sure if you wished, you could join their fan club, even become their leader perhaps."

Amidala made a face at him, which caused Anakin to laugh more as he attempted to drag her onto the dance floor. Amidala resisted, feeling a little out of place not only among such wild, carefree people, but with Anakin and the new role he was assuming in her life.

"I need air," Amidala pulled away from his hand in protest, "and, besides, your fans await!" And she slipped out onto the balcony. She looked up at the stars and breathed in the calm air of her home-world. If only . . .

She started as she sensed someone watching her. She looked over the balcony and saw a hooded figure on the bridge over the waterfalls. Obi-Wan began to shrink back, perhaps hoping she did not see him, but Amidala would have none of that. She waved. He returned the gesture just as something flew above her and landed on the railing by her finger-tips. She jumped back with a gasp and looked up at the smiling face of Anakin.

"Ani! You . . . ," she quickly bit back the curse words that always wanted to come out of her when she was around him. "What? I didn't quite catch that!" He laughed mockingly and did acrobatic flips on the thin rail, arrogantly displaying the skills of which only one strong in the Force was capable.

"Stop, Ani. You're scaring the . . ." and she bit back another bad word. He did one last flip and landed close to her, too close.

"Jedi Knight, I am not," he said mocking Yoda's voice, "but strong in the Force am I!"

"Stop it," she laughed nervously, they were too close. His slender form towered over her, and wisps of hair fell over his eyes. His movement was not an accident and he was ready to say something important, but there was a pleading in her eyes, begging him not to speak. Anakin obeyed the silent request.

"Don't stay out here too long!" He ordered pleasantly, and walked back to the party.

Amidala spun around and pressed her hand to her temples. Not now, oh not now, I don't want to think of him like that. I'll think of something else. She looked down at Obi-Wan who was now standing calmly on the edge of the bridge.

It was not difficult to slip out of the party, growing wilder by the

minute. Within minutes Amidala found herself almost running to meet the young Jedi.

Obi-Wan listened to the gurgling of the waterfall. The view was breathtaking and standing here right on the edge was like standing before Paradise. The Jedi had taken off his cloak and was leaning far out over the edge, easily keeping his balance. He was thinking that . . .

Obi-Wan turned quickly. Amidala was behind him, standing a few feet away. He bowed in respect.

"May I join you?" Amidala asked. Obi-Wan nodded. For a long time they stood silently listening to the comforting, rushing water.

Obi-Wan finally turned his sleek form toward her, "You look different, Amidala," he commented. "Different?" she asked. "Than earlier," he explained, letting his eyes take in her party clothes, casual, common, though of the finest cloth and cut. "Oh," she said embarrassed. More silence, again broken by Obi-Wan, "Why did you leave the party? It sounds like everyone is having fun." "Yes, it's quite a success, but I felt . . . out of place. I act like one of them, but it's a deception. As Queen I will never be a part of them." It felt good to express these feelings. If she spoke these to anyone else, her handmaidens' feelings would be hurt and Anakin . . . He would take it personally, and would be angry. Anger was something that Obi-Wan never seemed to feel. "Out of place," Obi-Wan repeated, "I know how that feels." "Of course you do. A Jedi must act a lot like royalty." He chuckled, "Not exactly." "Yes, exactly. We play the same role, just in different ways." Obi-Wan nodded, conceding the point. He was enjoying her company, yet was sincerely wishing her gone for he did not trust himself alone with her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel close to Obi-Wan. With him she felt safe. Her burdens left. Safe with this young Jedi who was older than she, yet a devoted friend.

A Queen and a Jedi. It would be good for her people to have such rulers, and she cared for Obi-Wan a great deal. She trusted him more than anyone she knew.

Amidala started as she saw Obi-Wan turning and staring at her intensely.

She mentally kicked herself as she remembered that a Jedi can all but read one's mind. Then she relaxed. So he knows. Big deal. Will Naboo suddenly evaporate in nothingness because Obi-Wan knows I care for him? Was it such a tragedy? I wonder what he'll do . . .? Would he . . .?

Obi-Wan took her hand and pressed it to his lips as if in answer. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"So, she returns my feelings," Obi-Wan thought. He had never felt so comfortable with anyone, or close. Their hands entwined and Obi-Wan was ready to dwell in this moment, let time stop, when the sense came like an electric shock that it was not the will of the Force for her to be with him. He knew it as surely as he knew the bridge was under his feet and air was coming into his nostrils.

Hardly had this knowledge registered when shadows were upon them

Anakin's head shot up in the midst of his adoring friends. Amidala was in danger. He raced onto the balcony and leaped into the abyss. Within seconds he was on the ground and running toward the bridge.

Like a streak of lightning, Obi-Wan had his lightsaber activated and was slashing through the attackers. In the brief instant before they died, he was able to glean from them the knowledge that they were there to harm the Amidala.

Within seconds it was all over and the trembling Queen didn't even have time to cry out.

She turned as Anakin came behind her, his blaster drawn.

He took in the scene and burst out, "I had no idea you were here with Obi-Wan!"

Obi-Wan felt the double meaning behind the boy's statement. He sensed jealousy and anger coming from Anakin, as well as fear for Amidala.

Anakin stalked around the Queen, blaster drawn, scanning the area, waiting for more attackers as Obi-Wan turned on his comlink and hailed Captain Panaka, "There has been an attempt on the Queen's life."

"We're coming," Panaka answered curtly.

Obi-Wan gave him their location and within minutes Amidala was swept from the bridge by her security guards, Panaka's body shielding her, and ushered into her transport.

2. Default Chapter Title

The Queen's quarters were swarming with security guards. Amidala was on her portable throne, her attention directed to the men before her. "The Chancellor will meet you at your summer residence," Panaka said.

"That is a comfort, Captain. Do you have any clue as to who was behind this attempt on my life?"

"It is too early to tell."

"What do you say, Obi-Wan?" Amidala asked him.

"I don't know. But of this I am certain: their intent was to kill you."

"Have you any idea why?" Panaka asked Amidala

"Assassination attempts are not uncommon for a monarch." Amidala said in her deep Queen's voice, "there are many people who could wish me dead. The King I defeated in the elections, members of the Trade Federation, or someone I have not even heard of, in a plot of which I am at present unaware."

"I know of what I am aware," Anakin broke in, "Once we get to your summer residence, you will stay until we get to the bottom of this!" Obi-Wan sensed the annoyance from Amidala. "On such matters I will of course defer to my chief of security," She said evenly, referring to Panaka, hoping the needed rebuke would not make her friend too angry.

Amidala sat on a couch in the Queen's office of her summer residence. The Chancellor was walking evenly before her.

"But you were careless, my Queen," Palpatine's face showed fatherly concern.

"I know." Amidala had been ashamed of herself from the moment the attackers came upon her.

"I understand, my dear, that you want to occasionally be as other young people are, but . . ."

"I gave up that right when I became Queen." "As you say, your Highness." Sighing he stopped in front of her, "I am sorry if I sound harsh. I am only speaking as I am because your safety is something that I hold very close to my heart."

"I am grateful for your concern, Chancellor. Many politicians do not care as you do."

"I thank you for the compliment. And my dear, I would suggest that from now on you must be watched. At all times."

The Queen nodded in agreement.

The drink gurgled as Palpatine poured the blue liquid into Anakin's glass. "Fortunate indeed that Obi-Wan was with the Queen."

"I was there too, Chancellor," Anakin said with annoyance. "Why must Obi-Wan always be the hero?"

Palpatine ignored the reference to Obi-Wan, and said kindly, "I am sorry that this unfortunate incident has interrupted your celebration. You may be pleased that your first mission will be to transport me to Alderaan."

"What mission?"

"I am sorry, I thought you knew. Of course, the Queen had not the time to inform you."

"Not had time? She's been with me two days!"

Palpatine did not comment on the boy's statement and said simply, "You are to be the pilot of my personal transport."

"I pilot?" The words raced through Anakin's mind. For the Chancellor! That would mean endless possibilities of places he could see, experiences flying, opportunities to inquire about his mother

"How? I mean, it is indeed a great honor, but to be given this opportunity just coming out of the Academy?"

"You are fortunate in your friends."

Anakin looked confused. Palpatine clarified, "Why, Queen Amidala of course."

Anakin bit his lips. He could already hear the gossip, the snide comments coming from other pilots who had worked years, but had yet to be given such a prestigious post. But this friend, this handsome `pet ` of Queen Amidala is made chief pilot to the Supreme Chancellor!

Palpatine seemed pleasantly unaware of the boy's thoughts and smiled, "Yes, the Queen has been very generous to you."

Amidala, draped in a red velvet gown, sat alone in her quarters. They were quite impressive, though she only used them for vacations. Not only did they have the most elegant furniture and decorations, but a small, indoor swimming pool glimmered in the center of her rooms.

She did not hear Obi-Wan enter at first, and was more startled when she saw his padawan, Geog, with him.

"We have been searching the area, Your Highness. Frightful though the situation is, I do not believe you are in danger."

"I put myself into that danger by following you outside the palace," Amidala said.

Obi-Wan nodded. Geog was fascinated by the emotions that seemed to be bouncing off the walls of the Queen's chamber.

With a swish, the doors opened and Anakin entered. He stopped short, not expecting Amidala to have visitors.

"Ani, you remember my padawan learner, Geog," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin scanned Geog with disdain. Weak, so weak, in the Force. "I remember him, but I came to speak with Amidala," he said rudely.

Obi-Wan questioned, "You will meet me later for refreshments?"

"Yes," he replied and saw Amidala cringe at the harshness in his

voice. "See you later," he said more congenially.

Obi-Wan, after all, was supposed to be his friend.

The moment the Jedi swept from the room Anakin went over to his friend and gripped her in his arms, needing to bend down to embrace her much shorter form.

"Don't you ever scare me like that!" He held her out at arms length and shook her gently, but with a curbed passion that frightened him. "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't, obviously," Amidala looked sorrowful, rings circled under her young eyes. Her mask was coming down. She was never good at being 'the Queen' around Anakin.

She sat down on her sofa, he beside her, holding both her hands

"Now what we can do to prevent such a thing?"

"Ani, I already spoke with the Chancellor, Panaka, and Obi-Wan about my security."

"But don't you trust me to look after you?" His voice was testy.

"No, that is not the case, but those men are responsible for me. You are not."

"Because I am just a kid, too young," Anakin's voice was bitter.

"Yes," Amidala said simply, "I will not say things that will give you a false confidence and feed your ego." Anakin bristled. "I must tell you the truth," Amidala continued, "You are young, inexperienced, and I would look to Obi-Wan before you to protect me any day."

"Obi-Wan, the perfect Jedi," Anakin spat the word and began to pace angrily, "As I would be if the Council was not too afraid of my power to train me."

"Afraid? Ani, you are talking nonsense."

"Oh, you know what I mean!"

"No, I don't. Or rather, I don't agree with your assessment of the situation. You must respect the Council. They are a guardian, a way to keep, to keep . . ."

"Upstarts like me from unbalancing the Force?"

"Perhaps," Amidala's mask was returning. She was getting cooler by the minute. She watched the restless Anakin who was trying to control his temper, and decided to steer the subject in a different direction, "You should not have such trouble accepting what you have:

a very promising career."

"Which you set up nicely for me," Anakin quickly replied. Amidala looked a little confused. "Arranged for me to pilot the Supreme Chancellor's transport," he explained.

"Yes, I recommended you. I am your most loyal friend."

"I could do with a little less friendship then," Anakin's face was becoming ominous. He pointed his finger at her, voice rising in volume, "Now everyone will be saying that it was you and not my skills that made me get this post."

Amidala was hurt and a little afraid of what she was seeing in her friend. But she wasn't going to play cowering victim to his temper. She cared for him too much to do so. Rather she stood up to him, "And if they do, what does it matter? You and I know that you are qualified. Isn't that all that is important? What do you care what others think?"

"I care a lot," Anakin returned, hotly thinking how little Amidala knew about men and their need to feel in control. But before he could become more resentful, he saw that his friend, now on her feet, had eyes that were not sad or cold, but rather were beginning to snap fire. He backed down, "Enough of this," Anakin muttered looking at the pool glimmering in the room, "I want to dip my feet." He turned his back and started taking off his pants entirely.

"Ani!"

"What?" he said, oh so innocently, pleased to see her face become more friendly.

"You're wicked!" She knew it was some sort of childish thing men always had to do around girls to try to shock them. And perhaps try to make up for a quarrel . . .

"A regular barbarian." He replied, smiling as he leaned over as though to roll up his pants, but instead threw Amidala, velvet and all, into the pool.

"Where's Amidala?" Obi-Wan asked Anakin.

"Drying off. She took quite a swim."

Obi-Wan's face was sober. "Her attackers will be found. It would be a comfort to know for certain the motivation for the attack."

"I'll find out, Obi," Anakin said with confidence and a manner of saying 'back off.' Obi-Wan did not have time to reply for Geog entered and Anakin impulsively used the Force to grab the padawan's lightsaber, allow it to fly across the room, and clutch it in a tight grip, before turning it off and handing it back to him.

Anakin's jaw was tight as he steered the Chancellor's transport into

deep space, "I thought that Obi-Wan's lecture would never end. Qui-Gon once said he was headstrong, a little rebellious. Why then does he have no sympathy for me? Always coming down on me as hard as he can?"

"But of course he had to rebuke you, Young Skywalker. Only a Jedi should use a lightsaber. Or the Force for that manner."

"I know. I couldn't help it sir." He laughed, "It was fun to unnerve Geog like that . . . and easy. He is so weak in the Force!"

"Yet the Council approved him for training," Palpatine commented.

"Yes, they did." There was a slight jar in the course as Ani's hand jerked left. Palpatine noticed this with pleasure, and waited until Anakin corrected the ship before he made his next comment, "It seems to me a certain arrogance that select individuals presume to decide whether or not one is called to a career as a Jedi."

"The Council?" Anakin asked.

"Yes."

"They know that I am stronger than many of them put together. But they sensed something, so we accepted it."

"Obi-Wan did."

"Yes."

"But did you?"

Anakin replied a little uneasily, "This is a subject that I don't think is a good idea to discuss."

Palpatine didn't seem to hear him, "Perhaps they were a little afraid of what might happen if you became a trained Jedi, or rather what would happen to them. Maybe one of them would have to step down, or yield their power." Palpatine mused, "Yoda is the strongest now, but you would have been more powerful than he, given the chance. Wasn't he the one who objected most strenuously to your training?"

Anakin did not answer but continued to feed the directions to Coruscant into the computer. Palpatine peeked over the young pilot's shoulders and gently observed, "Have a care, Young Skywalker. You just entered the wrong coordinates!"

Geog moved left, then right, then swiftly about the room as his master watched him fight the imaginary opponent, pose after pose, till he became a blinding streak. The imaginary opponent, like Darth Maul, had a double lightsaber. Obi-Wan was looking for an opportunity to slip into the fight. It came. Geog had just jumped into the air in a somersault. When he landed, faster than lightning Obi-Wan was before him. The hums of the weapons were deafening. It was a few seconds before Geog realized that his opponent was real. As their sabers clashed and buzzed, Obi-Wan seemed to come from every direction. He was moving too fast, Geog couldn't see him. He began to

slash blindly. He was afraid. For a moment he forgot who Obi-Wan was and that he was merely in a training session.

"Enough," Obi-Wan's voice stopped the fight. The lightsabers disappeared. Geog was panting, sweat streaming down his face. Obi-Wan hadn't even broken a sweat.

"You allowed your focus to shift." Master Obi-Wan circled his padawan pointing at him with his finger, "you allowed confusion to control your actions. A Jedi is never out of control with the present. That was your undoing,"

"Yes, Master."

"Again," Obi-Wan commanded.

"Just a moment's rest."

"Do you think an opponent would give you rest?"

Before Geog could answer, Obi-Wan was attacking again, this time using the double lightsaber that Jedi's used only for training. Darth Maul had made that a necessity.

Slash after slash Obi-Wan fought Geog, stopping only when the padawan passed out from exhaustion.

Amidala tried not to cry out as her hair was twisted into its formal style. The door to her quarters opened with a swish.

Without looking, Amidala told Obi-Wan, "You may speak, do not let my handmaiden's concern you."

"No news on your attempted assassins."

"As I supposed. Perhaps we will never know. Is it really so important that we find out?"

Obi-Wan pulled up a chair opposite the Queen, hands folded and pensive, "At the risk of sounding careless, I would answer, 'no.' I do not believe that this attack is any different than other routine attempts on sovereigns' lives."

"Except that I put myself in that vulnerable position by leaving the palace grounds so late at night."

Both blushed at the memory of that night, but neither mentioned what happened while they were looking at the waterfall. Somehow she knew that they never would.

Obi-Wan went on with the subject at hand, "Your Highness cannot allow herself free movement. That is a responsibility all rulers must face." Amidala nodded. Palpatine had told her the same thing.

"This matter is for your security force, not the Jedi. The Council has informed me that I am to go on a diplomatic mission with Geog to Alderaan. It seems that there is an internal matter that Bail Antilles wishes for me to mediate."

Amidala's hair was done. "That will be all," she dismissed her handmaidens. She turned to Obi-Wan, "Once again, we take different paths."

"Yes, your Highness."

"You may call me by my name. We are not in state now!" Amidala snapped, then immediately regretted her tone, "Forgive me, dear friend."

"Of course," Obi-Wan's steady voice replied, betraying emotion tightly bridled. In an uncharacteristic show of affection he leaned over Amidala and kissed her on the forehead, "'Dear friend' you will always be. If you ever need me . . ."

"I know that I can depend on you," Amidala finished for him. Obi-Wan nodded. With a bow, he lifted his hood over his head and resolutely left the room.

"A message from Supreme Chancellor Palpatine," a handmaiden informed Amidala.

"Chancellor," Amidala addressed him from her throne room, in her red dress, full make-up, "And how go the negotiations?"

"Very well. They are sending Jedi ambassadors to help."

"Yes, you are fortunate. Obi-Wan Kenobi and his padawan are coming."

"How pleasant! Time to renew old acquaintances, as well as be certain that the best men are coming to our aid." "Indeed. I am happy that your influence is spreading. Corruption seems to melt away in the presence of your congenial personality."

"Your Highness is flattering."

"Not at all. I am also pleased that Anakin will be at your side as you continue to work toward the goals of peace and harmony in our democracy."

"Yes, young Queen. I will be sure to keep an eye on Young Skywalker."

Amidala took off her last piece of jewelry by herself, dismissed her handmaidens, and sat in front of her vanity, brushing her hair. She still saw Obi-Wan's eyes, heard his calm voice, felt the warmth of knowing she was safe around him. But in these nights alone, after a difficult day, she knew who she missed, with whom she wished to relax, discuss the day's events, with whom she could merely sit on her couch and talk.

She pressed a buzzer by her vanity. "Yes," a voice immediately replied.

"I would like to send a transmission to Alderaan, personal."

"And to whom?"

"Anakin Skywalker."

Anakin was dangling his feet in the clear pools of Alderaan. He was trying not to think of Amidala. Perhaps he was being silly for his jealousy, she was indeed older than he. And Obi-Wan, his friend for years, seemed to bear Anakin's behavior with the patience of a . . . Jedi! Well he is one! (And I'm not) a dangerous echo came into his head. Anakin shook his head. Dwelling on that did no good, either. Amidala was right. Better to accept what is. He had a good mentor in Palpatine and two loyal friends. That's more than most men get in a life-time. Anakin felt a pang in his conscience. He had not been a very good friend to Obi-Wan and Amidala lately. It seems that he was always taking from them, and they were willing to accept that. But could he ever give?

Obi-Wan sensed Anakin's inner turmoil as he watched his friend by the pools of Alderaan. The boy is very insecure. One wouldn't know it by looking at his tall frame and cocky mannerisms, but often the greatest bravado hides the greatest vulnerability. To make matters worse, Anakin was the youngest in their circle of friends. Trying to make up for this would be impossible and a mistake. If only Anakin could see that! One's greatest strength comes from accepting how one is created, male or female, Jedi or follower, ruler or subject, each equal in dignity. The greatest of unrest seems always to begin when people chose to believe that their lives are inferior unless they are explicitly in leadership positions. How they forget that the greatest of people are usually the smallest in the limited eyes of the galaxy.

Anakin finally sensed his old friend watching him. He turned and smiled. The events and resentments of the past few days seemed to melt away the moment the friends saw each other.

Anakin called out, "Come on, Obi, throw off those robes and hang out with me for awhile." Obi-Wan laughed and complied.

Anakin picked up his fishing rod, paused, and said hesitantly, "It is good to see you, old friend."

"And you, Ani."

It felt good, for both men meant what they said.

"A personal message, Skywalker"

"Personal?"

He smiled and pushed on the screen. "Ami!" His voice lighted up and a grin spread across his handsome face, then, a shadow, "Nothing's wrong is it?"

"Nothing . . . wrong," the low voice answered.

Anakin sensed what she wanted and took it as great compliment. She wanted to vent. Women only did so to people with whom they felt close.

He gave her a leading question, "So, what have you been up to?"

"You don't know the half of it! Can I begin to tell you how this day straight from the pits has begun . . . ?"

"Go right ahead, sweetheart!" Anakin grinned and sat down to talk to his best friend.

Palpatine sat smugly in his dimly-lit room, thinking of the events of the past few days. Obi-Wan had been there at every moment, thwarting the atmosphere of fear and mistrust that he was trying to build. Not for the first time did he wish that Darth Maul had not killed Qui-Gon. How he needed that Jedi's weakness in his plans now! Qui-Gon's pride in his own judgment had clouded his reason, made him lose objectivity, and thereby unity with the Council. Palpatine wanted that. The Jedi out alone, confused, mistrustful of each other. A man must divide, before he can conquer. And how Palpatine wanted to divide and conquer the Jedi. The only way he saw to do so was to weaken the Council.

Obi-Wan had been promising. His misguided compassion almost tempted him to disobey the Code, defy the Council, and they nearly took the bait--the ultimate bait--to act against their judgment and cave in to the defiant ones. But something stopped Obi-Wan from accepting their concession. His small act of obedience set Palpatine's plans back for years . . . perhaps permanently.

Palpatine shook his head. No, he would not accept that. He did have something promising: Young Skywalker. The pilot's insecurity was his weakness. It was this young man, strong in the Force, who would be a powerful ally in building his Empire once he defeated the Jedi. He was therefore glad to have Anakin as his pilot. It was easy to persuade the Queen that it would be good for the boy. How she listened when he calmed her fears that her interference would hurt his manhood and his confidence, as Palpatine knew it would. He did not need to outright confront Skywalker, not yet at least, but little by little, he would chip away the good that was in the boy, damage his discernment, and then bring him over to the Dark Side.

Palpatine was pleased with his progress in this area. He knew of the boy's fear, and anyone, even without the Force, dark or light, could tell where the boy's heart lay. Putting Amidala in danger was a work of genius. And to have Obi-Wan present during the attack to spark more fear, insecurity, jealousy, feelings of inadequacy . . . How perfect it was! Yes, Skywalker's career was going nicely. He did not think of the men who died in that futile attempt on Amidala's life. It would have been nice if they had succeeded. Imagine the guilt that Obi-Wan would have felt, the resentment that could have been built between himself and Anakin! But alas, it was not to be. Despite this, all turned out right in the end. These pawns in his power play

continued to move elusively, but surely in his direction.

Power. Palpatine sighed. It never comes cheap, but a Sith makes sure that the price is paid by somebody else.

He grinned and turned out the light

End
file.